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CS349

INTERNET TOXICITY

HAVE YOU EVER GOTTEN INTO AN ARGUMENT ONLINE?

- ▶ Who were you arguing with?
- ▶ What was the exchange like?
- ▶ Were you satisfied with the outcome?

WHAT IS INTERNET TOXICITY?

- ▶ Hard to encapsulate but widely recognized idea of bullying tactics used in public spaces on the Internet to demean, insult, and silence victims

WHY DO PEOPLE BEHAVE LIKE THAT?

- ▶ Psychological idea of “online disinhibition effect”
 - ▶ Can allow people who are too shy in real life to open up to online friends
 - ▶ Also emboldens people to express socially unacceptable behaviors

CONTRIBUTING FACTORS OF ONLINE DISINHIBITION EFFECT

- ▶ Dissociative anonymity
 - ▶ Relative anonymity of Internet makes person feel safe while allowing them to dissociate their actions from their sense of self (person can do things they'd never do in real life)
- ▶ Invisibility
 - ▶ Lack of face-to-face communication means no micro-expressions, which is part of how humans feel and understand empathy
- ▶ Asynchronous communication
 - ▶ Ability to disconnect immediately after saying something reduces sense of inhibition
- ▶ Solipsistic introjection
 - ▶ Interaction with another person can feel like an interaction in person's own head, which reduces other person's agency and allows person to believe they know what the other is thinking/feeling
- ▶ Dissociative imagination
 - ▶ Separation of online identity from real life identity makes online "life" feel less real with less real consequences
- ▶ Minimizing Authority
 - ▶ Feeling that everyone is equal in online communication makes person more willing to act in a way they would not do before an authority figure

PUT ANOTHER WAY...

Unreal Tournament 2004 lends incontrovertible proof to John Gabriel's Greater Internet Fuckwad Theory.

Normal Person



+

Anonymity



+

Audience



=

Total Fuckwad



$2+3=Cats$

$6. = \frac{1}{n} \sum x_i = \frac{1}{n} (\sum x_i)$

WHY ELSE DO PEOPLE BEHAVE LIKE THAT?

- ▶ Ability to find people who agree with you
 - ▶ Validation and sense of community
- ▶ Ability to find people who disagree with you
 - ▶ Sense of persistent, external existential threat
- ▶ Sense of community plus sense of external threat leads to greater levels of radicalization as a group

ECHO CHAMBERS AND THE QUEST FOR PURITY

- ▶ As group becomes more radicalized, individuals are expected to match that level of radicalization
 - ▶ Viewpoints that are considered “outside” are shut down
 - ▶ Interactions with those considered “outsiders” become more vitriolic
- ▶ Online disinhibition accelerates this radicalization process
- ▶ Subculture self-policing leads to “purity” culture
 - ▶ Self-righteousness feels very satisfying as does having power over others

CASE STUDY: TUMBLR AND STEVEN UNIVERSE

- ▶ In 2017, a fan artist on tumblr was subjected to name-calling and told to “go die” for drawing fanart that was “problematic”
 - ▶ Previous pieces had gotten her labeled transphobic, racist, etc
- ▶ After being labeled fatphobic for making a Steven Universe character too skinny, she supposedly attempted suicide
 - ▶ Posted a video from a hospital claiming she was being treated
- ▶ Community continued to bully her and claim suicide attempt was faked
- ▶ Creators of Steven Universe stepped in to say they do not support bullying

ATTACKS ON CREATOR, REBECCA SUGAR

- ▶ Sugar, previously praised by tumblr's Steven Universe community for creating inclusive, female-centric, positive media, now personally attacked by that community
- ▶ As a minor, she'd drawn non-graphic slash (male/male relationship) fanart of underage characters earning her accusations of pedophilia
- ▶ ...basically parts of the cartoon's community didn't like that the woman who wanted to create safe, positive media for marginalized people didn't condone bullying

THIS IS WHY

WE CAN'T HAVE NICE THINGS

quickmeme.com

TROLLING AS NIHILISTIC AND COWARDLY

- ▶ Meanwhile, on the other side of the Internet, glorification of “for the lulz” culture also leads to bullying
 - ▶ Can’t expect someone you don’t know to “take it as a joke”
 - ▶ Tendency to attack already marginalized people encourages lack of empathy and lack of courage
 - ▶ Fear of being emotionally open and vulnerable leads to a less connected, less satisfying life
- ▶ A Tom Stoppard quote comes to mind:
 - ▶ “The destroyers wear nihilism like a cockade - they think they destroy because they’re radicals. But they destroy because they’re disappointed conservatives - let down by the ancient dream of a perfect society where circles are squared and conflict is cancelled out”

DO YOU WANT ANTS?

BECAUSE THAT'S HOW YOU GET ANTS.

makeameme.org

WHEN DOES EXPRESSING A VIEW BECOME BULLYING?

- ▶ How does the context change when you post something online versus say it to friends?
- ▶ Why should you care about the feelings of others?
- ▶ Why does bullying ultimately harm everyone?

SO IF EVERYONE IS A JERK ON THE INTERNET, IS IT HOPELESS?

- ▶ No! The pendulum is always swinging
 - ▶ Awareness helps promote discussion
 - ▶ Most people want safe platforms for connecting with others and expressing views
- ▶ Bullies most likely a vocal minority
 - ▶ They seem much more prevalent than they are
- ▶ Our human brains are still adapting to online communication
 - ▶ As society changes, so too must social contracts and expectations...

REFERENCES

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